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Theisohn, Philipp

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ON SHARING LITERATURE

Digitality and Uniqueness

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4RX◊ēThis text begins with an expropriation by the digital medium: in other
words, with a damaged file. The computer I used to write these lines repaired
them all by itself, thus converting four pages of literary work into a peculiar
ideographic wasteland. As far as the computer is concerned, the text continues
to be legible. As for me, the creator of the data, who would like to have these
characters reconverted into a message that can be printed, copied and elabora-
ted – I’m just a needy nuisance. If you want literature, well, you simply have to
WRITE; but we’ve long since stopped writing, except for maybe rare occasions
like on a greeting card. As a rule, all we do now is manipulate algorithms and
their graphic representations. The material basis of our «script», that is, its
digital composition, is something we never get to see. Which is why we have come
to believe that it is essentially meaningless for our production and reception of
literature. And yet, in point of fact, the digital medium meets our current expecta-
tions of the appropriation and distribution of texts.N%oG™Ñv|4fl.ÿ•™o0.
ñ™|fr&±+ânFe,tFk5SûiA>:û?oëüü“ä/÷zjÜÿ“Ö/>ÿ&T@!¶PlkHThat sounds
rather strange at first, since one could hardly claim that «digital literature» has
been a success so far. In fact, you could make the opposite claim: among ordinary
contemporary cultural products there is probably none that has contributed as
little to the world’s digital networking as literature. For while the circulation
of sound files and films has drawn millions to the net, literature has proven too
ungainly to participate in this form of cultural activity.

Of course there are digitising projects springing up all over the place; of
course every classic is available somewhere as a crap scan; of course there are
e-books, even e-books you can have printed on demand. Of course digital litera-
ture providers also occasionally have run-ins with the «classic publishing world»,

but compared to the upheavals ongoing in the music industry, for instance,
literature still seems to be a fairly resistant inhabitant of Planet Analogue. It’s
rare that you hear authors moaning about leaked books, or the mass illegal
downloading of copyrighted works; at most there’s the odd elegy on the decline
of literary manners under the influence of copy/paste, but to be honest these are
just so much compensatory carry-on. In the light of day they are evidence less
of pressure on literature to adapt to the new media than of the reverse: the lack
of any such pressure.ãÖİwZGSflRäçôúS7bâÜ:gDbeFúIÜ™Sjû:İmqA7wü

¶“fiqöukVë“?◊VÜ:Now, that doesn’t mean the digital re-organisation of our
lives has had absolutely no effect on literature. After all, the net certainly does
confront the world of the book with specific communication practices, new mod-
els of creativity and, above all, an economic regime that is well-nigh inelucta-
ble. (Whether you approve of it, condemn it – or both at once, as is typically the
case.) The basic principle guiding the use of digital media by human beings is
that of *sharing*. Things are shared in a variety of ways. The collation and link-
ing of media content in a social profile is the most superficial instantiation of
this principle. But the wide range of mass reprocessing techniques, such as the
serial distortion of celebrity pix by users of photoshop, are essentially a part of
sharing. The collaborative creation of texts by way of google.docs, meanwhile,
looks more like good old work as we used to know it. But what is common to
all of these phenomena is the casual way we define our own creations on the
net according to a certain given, while making those creations available to
others as templates. (Even if it’s only to have a text, formally pleasing per se,
disfigured by more or less qualified comments.) %ü“+ú\$Qá{V“óq|LSV±ÜiAÖU
∞Ä/řÍZÖ9t In doing so we are only pursuing the logic proper to the medium
itself, which transforms us all into workers in a gigantic text memory, all of us
scrabbling around together, extending and rewriting it second by second, al-
though it can of course never belong to any one of us alone, nor will it – since
it consists essentially of nothing more than computing processes we ourselves
are linking together. In short, it’s no place for works of literature.

Upload a work into the net and it changes its form: it becomes sharable, it is
processed, commented on, extended – on the very site on which it has appeared.
It is granted a new existence in a secondary life.±ZÆ“tâ±Σ,ç iä“6ç|}–O+&
□û>“lyiäUH.“|H+EH1e@/è7C.y12i!er“Ec0FPBR“§@èâS±±<“i,-VQ:,7V|±7O
™Cá“#Ö,èÄYJ•óã.d].ÉÊwethİfMore important than such ontological mystifi-
cation, however, is a very simple observation: if it is the case that the majority of
our contemporaries in the First and Second Worlds are permanently confronted
with the principle of «writing» as nothing more than sharing, and that the
necessary condition for legibility is its sharability – then it is only a matter of
time before such considerations make themselves felt in the production of litera-
ry texts. This is by no means intended merely to further the recrudescence of
writer’s communities, which are in any case among the basic features of litera-
ry culture and have persisted as an alternative model throughout even the age
of copyright. (In particular they are a feature of all romantic movements, includ-
ing, in the final analysis, postmodern textual theory.) No: first and foremost, it
is in fact a question of the cultural power of attention.N%oG™Ñv|4fl.ÿ•™o0.
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.ztO...70ûlÂΣã Yñ†}ñS-~Kád.e6UEēYŮ:πódY6ΠS&éThe principle of sharing, which we deem constitutive of all actions in the digital space, has massively altered our access to culture. To a much greater degree than twenty years ago, marketing has become a part of artistic production – from cabaret performances to the new grindcore album and Hollywood blockbuster. To be sure, there has always been «advertising» – and note the origins of the word in the Latin for «to turn toward» or «draw [attention] to». But since the sphere from which most people get their information these days about cultural happenings only functions by means of participation, sharing itself is conceptually operative.

On the web, cultural products are deliberately made available to users in increments: music is streamed, computer games are made playable, series and films are heralded with a multitude of trailers. And here too there is the horde of commentators and commentators of commentators, who do nothing else but confirm the relevance of any given product by sharing its segments with others. %ü"~ú\$Qã{V°q|LSV‡ÜlÄÖU∞Äfî'fZÔf~9t°örz6#ÄbEÄ)'öŒ,öäjä%oo Y6±^ããÄäIf we still believe that literature has nothing to do with any of this, it's because we imagine that a sample extract from a book represents the ultimate in its incremental usage. People interested in purchasing a digital text may occasionally take a look at those ten pages from the first chapter, only to decide against buying the thing after all. But it isn't attention that the sample extract produces. No: if literature is to have a digital future – and whether such a future is absolutely necessary is another story – then we will have to come to grips above all with the way in which it can be shared. Current debates tend to abbreviate this question to a discussion of copyright, which unfortunately is of no use since what is essentially at stake is not who may use a text in which form, but rather *how it is shared*, how users can participate in it. And we still haven't come up with much on this question, apart from some half-hearted experimental attempts to create a novel in partnership with a virtual readership. (Stephen King has famously tried this.) IÊ»~"T#Aä:;1hñÄ6ir©lñ"nCnO

ãÖİwΣGS'ñRäçöú\$~bäÜ:gDbeFú1Ü Meanwhile it is becoming clear where answers are to be found: digital culture thrives on events. If you follow authors who work the net (and only a very few young writers are without a Facebook presence, for example), you will notice that literature is increasingly staged there as an event. Readings have ceased to be mere ruminations of the printed word and have become the site at which the text becomes at all visible. And more than that: the photo tweeted en route belongs to the text as well, and enhances it. (And if you do follow the relevant authors, you will notice that such photos, together with a comments sections, do in fact keep literature up to date. The editors of the critical apparatus of the future are going to have a field day.)

And thus the «spoken word» movement, for example, which has been gaining in prominence in recent years in Switzerland and beyond, is revealing itself ever more clearly as the other face of digitisation. Just once, just for one evening, just that one moment is available to be shared. Literature that aims to be digital requires such uniqueness above all things. The rest will then follow of its own accord. Whether it likes it or not zã3=1A£dÄ<Lð©[g1/◇δlÄa} Í[ÓüΠ&ÓΣYz~HrªuÖgξ

Translated from the German by Rafaël Newman.

Philipp Theisohn

Born 1974 in the Palatinate (Germany), lives in Zurich. Professor of Modern German Literature at the University of Zurich, where he heads a research project studying the «Conditio extraterrestris».

Website: <http://www.ds.uzh.ch/conditioextraterrestris.html>